Nonlocal Consciousness, Narrative Epistemologies, and Intertextual Inheritance in Dan Brown's *The Secret of Secrets*

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Death plays an important role in most thrillers and mysteries, underpinning the plot and heightening tension. In Dan Brown's novel, *The Secret of Secrets* (Doubleday 2025), death itself becomes the main problem to solve. The book is categorized as a mystery thriller, though some might call it a techno-thriller for its reliance on science and technology to drive the plot. In addition to a series of murders, the real mystery of Brown's novel revolves around this question: What is consciousness? This paper examines key sections of the novel that develop thanatological and philosophical arguments about consciousness, revealing how Brown uses them to blur the boundary between empirical science and metaphysical speculation.

The novel features Brown's recurring protagonist, Robert Langdon, Professor of Religious Iconography and Symbology, partnered once again with Dr. Katherine Solomon, a noetic scientist who first appeared in *The Lost Symbol* (Doubleday, 2009). The name Katherine comes from the Greek word *katharos*, meaning "clear" or "pure," and Solomon was the fourth monarch of Israel, known for his esoteric knowledge and ability to bind demons to build his temple and serve him. In *The Secret of Secrets*, Dr. Solomon also possesses esoteric knowledge, dangerous and forbidden insights (at least according to the CIA) with which to establish a new mode of spirituality (read metaphorically as "build a new temple") based on her understanding of neuroscience and nonlocal consciousness. Nonlocal consciousness occupies a central position in the narrative, at times giving the impression that the novel itself functions primarily as a vehicle for exploring the concept and its spiritual and social ramifications. Just before the prologue, Brown presents us with three facts, the second of which states "All experiments, technologies, and scientific results [in the novel] are true to life." This paratextual framing collapses the boundary between fiction and reality while establishing the text's authority upfront, priming the reader to suspend disbelief in the novel's more speculative elements.

Narrating this story from the third-person omniscient perspective puts Brown himself in the role of narrative God, dispensing and withholding insights to heighten suspense, create tension, and lend weight to philosophical arguments as he sees fit. In the prologue, we open with a scene of science confronting spirituality (the novel's underlying theme) through a firsthand experience of dying, establishing the particular thanatological framework the text will explore. Dr. Brigita Gessner, a neuroscientist and associate of Katherine Solomon, is having an out-of-body experience due to the fact that she is currently being murdered by a mysterious golem-like figure: "Disoriented, she strained to make sense of her predicament. *I am a neuroscientist*, she reassured herself. *I am of sound mind"* (p. 5). Dr. Gessner believes scientific methodology and logic are equivalent to mental well-being. She is engaging in an inner dialogue to make sense of death even as the event unfolds: "*I have died*. *This is the afterlife*. Even as the notion materialized, she rejected it as absurd. *The afterlife is a shared delusion … created to make our actual life bearable"* (p. 5). Dr. Gessner represents the skeptical scientific mindset, simplified by Brown into a character that reads more like a caricature.

An out-of-body experience (or OBE) is the experience that one's consciousness has somehow separated from one's body. The experience may be of floating somewhere near one's body as a ghostlike reflection of oneself, or the experience may be of oneself becoming a perceptual field bereft of any form or clear boundary. Brown opts for the latter version in this passage from page 5: "She was without mass and form. And yet the rest of her, the *real* her—her essence, her consciousness—seemed to be quite intact and alert, floating slowly through the air…" OBEs are well-documented phenomena. However, the notion that an OBE involves consciousness literally

separating from the physical body is questionable. To truly answer the question of whether consciousness is capable of leaving its shell, you would first have to explain what *consciousness* is, and you would also have to explain what *matter* is, which gets very tricky when you get down to the subatomic level of reality. Current research indicates OBEs are physically traceable neuropsychological events, yet despite numerous anecdotal reports, no account of a person in a disembodied state accurately describing a shoe on a roof or a coin on top of a cabinet has ever been objectively verified.

We are in Dr. Gessner's mind from page 5 to the top of page 7, sharing her thoughts, experiencing the OBE from her perspective, feeling her confusion, which initiates the mystery and the tension of the story, but at the middle of page 7 we are abruptly removed from her mind (highlighted in bold type):

"Why are you doing this?!" Gessner had screamed in panic. "Who are you?!" *What are you?!*

"I am her protector," the monster replied. His voice was hollow, his accent vaguely Slavic. "She trusted you … and you betrayed her."

"Who?!" Gessner demanded.

The monster spoke a woman's name, and Gessner felt a stab of panic.

Immediately after this narrative distancing Brown shifts back to narrating the scene in close third person, and we are inside her mind: *"How can he possibly know what I have done?!"* (p. 7). But a few lines later we are taken out of her mind once again and told the following events occurred: "Racked with terror, Gessner spoke as quickly as she could through clenched teeth, frantically revealing the secrets she had vowed to keep. She answered his questions, divulging the disturbing truth about what she and her partners had created deep beneath the city of Prague" (p. 7). In addition to portraying the literal detachment of Gessner's consciousness from her body, Brown orchestrates a perspectival out-of-body experience for the reader as we oscillate between inhabiting her panicked interiority and being abruptly expelled into an external perspective where her actions are reported. Mystery authors often sacrifice narrative trust for the sake of heightening suspense, mirroring the genre's main source of tension: positioning the reader at the cusp of revelation without allowing them to be fully secure in their understanding of events.

OBE data presented at the First International Forum of Consciousness Research in 1999: 85% of the 1,185 respondents claimed to have had between two and ten OBEs, 5.5% claimed to have had more than 100 such experiences, 45% claimed to have successfully induced at least one OBE by using a specific OBE-inducing technique, 62% claimed to experience non-physical flight, 40% claimed to see their own body while floating outside of it, and 38% claimed to have passed through solid objects such as walls[1].

Dr. Gessner dies at the end of the prologue, revealing the story's metaphysical stance: "She tried to shout an appeal for mercy, but her voice was muted by a deafening thunderclap as the sky above her seemed to open wide. She felt herself gripped by an unseen force—a kind of reverse gravity—lifting her higher, dragging her upward" (p. 8). Again, we are given just enough information to conclude something intriguing is happening, but not enough to solve the mystery of what happens when we die. The end of Dr. Gessner's story serves as the beginning of Langdon and Solomon's. The understanding that death is not the end but rather the beginning is

a motif throughout the text. As happens so often in mystery novels, the beginning contains an ending (usually to a physical life), and the ending contains a beginning (usually to a new understanding of life). The first sentence of Brown's novel involves the ending of someone's story (Dr. Gessner): "*I must have died*, the woman thought" (p. 5). And the final sentence of the novel involves ushering in a new epoch of human understanding, with the delivery of Katherine's groundbreaking book to her publisher. After Gessner's death, the novel's exploration of consciousness shifts from the experiential to the theoretical, introducing the "hard problem of consciousness" in a lecture given by Katherine Solomon:

"So can we all start by agreeing on the basics? Consciousness is created by your brain—the three-pound bundle of eighty-six billion neurons inside your skull—and therefore *consciousness* is located inside our heads."

Nods all around.

"Wonderful," Katherine said. "We've all just agreed on the currently accepted model of human consciousness." After a beat, she sighed heavily. "The problem is . . . the currently accepted model is *dead wrong*. Your consciousness is *not* created by your brain. And in fact, your consciousness is not even located *inside* your head" (p. 15).

The "hard problem of consciousness" (a phrase coined by philosopher David Chalmers[2] in 1995) is crucial not only to this story's plausibility but to the plausibility of nonlocal consciousness. The story does not merely incorporate nonlocal consciousness as a plot device; a substantial portion of the novel is devoted to establishing the conceptual legitimacy of nonlocal consciousness, developing this argument across 91 of its 671 pages. But in order to properly analyze and weigh Katherine's argument, we must become familiar with other equally viable discourses and counterarguments regarding this subject. The hard problem of consciousness boils down to our inability to explain how neurobiological mechanisms produce our subjective qualitative experiences, such as the experience of redness or the feeling of pain. There seems to be no directly identifiable causal link between physical processes and their phenomenal manifestations. Philosophers and scientists have generally been divided into two camps when it comes to the hard problem of consciousness. The physicalist camp believes consciousness is produced within the brain, and it's simply a matter of time until we figure out the processes of its emergence. The other camp thinks of consciousness as something fundamental to the universe, often likening it to a radio signal, and our brains are the receivers. This understanding of consciousness is generally referred to as nonlocal consciousness. Theories of nonlocal consciousness view consciousness as an extraphysical force located outside the brain, and our brains must filter away most of this universal consciousness in order to achieve our individualized perspectives, like tuning a radio to one frequency or another. Katherine Solomon argues that the inhibitory neurotransmitter GABA plays a crucial role in this filtering process.

A theory is any model that reduces a large set of observations to a more manageable set of coherent principles which can be tested and used to make predictions. Theories are generally expressed through the conceptual frameworks of science and mathematics, striving for a sort of disembodied, nonlocal objectivity, free from subjective human perspective. Physicalist theories of consciousness are generally divided into four groups: higher-order, global workspace, predictive processing, and integrated information. Higher-order theories propose that basic

mental states become conscious only when represented by higher-order mental states. For example, a first-order mental state associated with tissue damage becomes consciously felt as pain once it is the object of a higher-order mental representation. Global workspace theory suggests that background thoughts become foreground awareness when broadcast across multiple regions of the brain working together to produce experience, the gist being that consciousness acts as a spotlight to bring certain information to our awareness while leaving the bulk of our accumulated data in the shadows of the unconscious. Predictive processing theory conjectures your brain is continuously assessing the world to see if it matches your prior model and expectations of reality, noting any differences that come into your field of awareness and adjusting its model and expectations accordingly. Integrated information theory surmises that a system can be considered conscious if it generates more information as a whole than can be generated by the sum of its parts.

Nonlocal theories of consciousness are generally divided into four groups: quantum, hyperdimensional, field consciousness (the radio signal theory), and the universal mind. Quantum theories of consciousness incorporate the quantum mechanical concepts of non-determinism (i.e., subatomic behavior is inherently unpredictable), superposition (i.e., the ability of a particle to exist in multiple positions or states simultaneously), and entanglement (i.e., a phenomenon where two or more particles become correlated in such a way that measuring one instantly affects the state of the others, regardless of the distance between them) in an effort to explain the qualitative experience of consciousness. The leading proponents of quantum consciousness theory are anesthesiologist Stuart Hameroff and physicist Roger Penrose. Their "Orchestrated Objective Reduction" theory proposes that consciousness arises from quantum processes (i.e., orchestrated collapses of the quantum wave function) occurring within the microtubules comprising the structure of neurons in the brain[3]. Hyperdimensional theories of consciousness posit there are eleven dimensions, ten involving space and one involving time, but seven of the spatial dimensions are so small (on the Planck scale) that they are undetectable to our four-dimensional senses and instruments, and consciousness arises within these imperceptible dimensions. Field theories of consciousness postulate that the brain does not generate consciousness but instead acts as a receiver for nonlocal fields of consciousness, similar to how a radio tunes into certain frequencies. The fourth view of nonlocal consciousness sees consciousness as fundamental and all-pervasive. Consciousness is everywhere, and everything is imbued with it. The main issue with every nonlocal solution to the hard problem of consciousness is that it merely moves the source of mystery one step further, doing nothing to unveil the root causes and underlying mechanics of consciousness.

Katherine Solomon is an adherent of a combination of "field" and "universal mind" theories of nonlocal consciousness, as revealed in this passage: "'The theory,' Katherine had said, 'is called *nonlocal consciousness*. And it's based on the premise that consciousness is *not* localized to your brain . . . but rather it is *everywhere*. That is to say, consciousness permeates the universe. Consciousness is, in fact, one of the fundamental building blocks of our world'" (p. 262). The prologue's rendering of a disembodied OBE as an objective event indicates that Katherine's specific take on nonlocal consciousness is at least partially correct according to the physics of this novel's world.

The term *out-of-body experience* was coined in 1943 by G.N.M. Tyrell[4]. In 1968, Celia Green conducted the first large-scale study of OBEs, querying 400 subjects[5]. She proposed the term *metachoric experience* to denote a semi-conscious state wherein a person's entire field of perception is replaced with a hallucination that incorporates perceived elements from the real world. In 2001, Dr. Sam Parnia and colleagues investigated OBE claims by placing figures on suspended boards facing the ceiling, not visible from the floor. According to Dr. Parnia, "Anybody who claimed to have left their body and be near the ceiling during resuscitation attempts would be expected to identify those targets. If, however, such perceptions are psychological, then one would obviously not expect the targets to be identified." The year-long investigation consisted of 63 cardiac arrest survivors, 7 of whom had memories of the time they were unconscious, and 4 of whom had near-death experiences (according to the investigation's criteria for such phenomena). The philosopher Keith Augustine later confirmed that all OBE target identification experiments in Dr. Parnia's investigation produced negative results[6].

In 2008, twenty-five U.K. and U.S. hospitals began participation in a large-scale OBE study coordinated once again by Dr. Sam Parnia, known as the AWARE study. As part of the study, Dr. Parnia placed hidden targets on shelves that could only be seen from above. According to Dr. Parnia, "if no one sees the pictures, it shows these experiences are illusions or false memories." Dr. Parnia issued a statement in 2014 indicating the first phase of the project was complete. No subjects saw any of the images that were mounted out of sight. Only 9% of the participants had NDEs, and only 2% reported hearing and seeing events in an OBE. In the words of parapsychologist Caroline Watt, "The one 'verifiable period of conscious awareness' that Dr. Parnia was able to report did not relate to this objective test. Rather, it was a patient giving a supposedly accurate report of events during his resuscitation. He didn't identify the pictures, he described the defibrillator machine noise. But that's not very impressive since many people know what goes on in an emergency room setting from seeing recreations on television[7]."

Dr. Shahar Arzy and colleagues demonstrated in 2006 that self-location and body recognition involve two posterior brain regions: the temporoparietal junction (TPJ) is involved in spatially situating oneself within one's environment; and the extrastriate body area (EBA) is involved in spatially situating oneself within one's body[8]. Mentally embodied self-location mainly involves the extrastriate body area (EBA), whereas disembodied self-location mainly involves the temporoparietal junction (TPJ).

Returning to Katherine's argument, Robert Langdon recalls her lecture from the night before, which opened with an image of a human brain: "'I realize it looks more like a mound of very old hamburger, but I can assure you, this organ is nothing short of miraculous. It contains approximately eighty-six *billion* neurons. Together they form over a hundred *trillion* synaptic connections, which can process complex information almost instantly […] We each store millions of gigabytes of data in here—images, memories, lifetimes of education, skill sets, languages . . . all sorted and organized neatly in this tiny space […] Materialist scientists remain baffled as to how an organ so *small* could possibly hold such *vast* quantities of information'" (p. 100). The section establishes Katherine's authority through the introduction of neuroscientific facts while prepping us for the intellectual journey ahead. By framing the expositional passage within the familiar setting of a lecture hall, Brown transforms what might otherwise seem like intrusive narrative explanation into an immersive scene. The reader receives the information along with Langdon and the audience, thereby reinforcing the sense of participation in the

unfolding story. This method of informational dissemination recurs throughout the novel, making complex ideas feel integrated rather than imposed. Furthermore, we associate lecture halls with intellectual authority and professionalism, making the reader more receptive to the information being divulged.

Later in the novel, we revisit Katherine's lecture in another flashback, this time from the perspective of the golem-like entity listening to her offer proof that physicalist theories of consciousness are inadequate: "'There exists an extraordinary phenomenon,' Katherine had said, 'that proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that our traditional views of consciousness are entirely wrong. It's called sudden savant syndrome, and the clinical definition is as follows: 'The abrupt manifestation in a human mind of a unique skill or knowledge that previously was nonexistent'" (p. 122). In addition to the murder of Dr. Gessner—and perhaps more important to the reader—the novel's deeper mysteries are *what is consciousness?* and *what happens when we die?* These questions bleed beyond the page into the reader's real life, not just their imagination. The narrative is attempting to smuggle its version of reality into the reader while also transporting the reader into its world.

Any novel seriously concerned with the subject of life after death would be incomplete without acknowledging the work of Dr. Raymond Moody, arguably the most famous spokesperson for the life-after-death argument: "Langdon's only encounter with near-death experiences had been in the pages of Raymond Moody's 1975 bestseller, *Life After Life*, the book credited with persuading scientists to look more seriously at the possibility that death was not the end of a journey . . . but rather just the beginning" (p. 192). Interviews with Dr. Moody always involve reminding the audience that he famously coined the phrase "near-death experience" in 1975, failing to mention that almost a century earlier, in 1896, Victor Egger coined the term "experience of imminent death" to describe life reviews, tunnels of light, time dilation, and other phenomena that climbers said they experienced during falls from great heights[9]. Claiming Dr. Moody originated a widely recognized term is an attempt to bolster his reputation, but the omission of Egger's prior thanatological contribution undermines the very credibility the claim seeks to establish, suggesting Moody's authority relies on a constructed narrative and selective framing. Such manufactured authority is characteristic of most works of fiction. *The Secret of Secrets*, like so many religious, scientific, and philosophical narratives about consciousness, death, and the afterlife, constructs credibility through strategic framing (e.g., omitting counterarguments, the biased orchestration of what counts as knowledge).

Katherine Solomon's argument for the plausibility of nonlocal consciousness incorporates a reasoned appeal to ignorance: "'Yes, and I agree that repeatability is a reasonable burden of proof at the *macroscopic* level. But at the *quantum* level, things work differently. The quantum world is understood to be *unpredictable*. In fact, unpredictability is quite literally its most agreed-upon state […] The language of the quantum world […] is literally the language of *unpredictability*—probability waves, quantum fluctuations, uncertainty principles, probabilistic tunneling, chaos, quantum interference, decoherence, superpositions, dualities. All of this translates loosely to 'We don't know what's going to happen because the classical rules of physics don't apply!'" (p. 338). Her argument is that repeatability is an unreasonable burden of proof when dealing with the subject of consciousness and paranormal phenomena, implying scientific methodology actually obstructs scientific progress in some cases. Dr. Raymond Moody

echoes this sentiment in his most recent interview at the time of this writing[10], stating, "The logic of unintelligibility may very well give us rational proof of an afterlife."

Reasoned appeals to ignorance use the absence of definitive knowledge to reframe uncertainty as evidence of possibility. Katherine's argument concerning repeatability transitions into the radio analogy of nonlocal consciousness, never specifying what kind of information the brain-radio is receiving, or how the brain-radio receives it, or where the transmission originates: "'In the nonlocal consciousness model, your brain is a kind of radio that *receives* consciousness, and like all radios it has countless stations bombarding it all the time […] The radio itself has the capacity to receive all stations, but without a way to filter the frequencies that flow in, it would play all those frequencies at once. The human brain works the same way; it has a complex series of filters to prevent the mind from being *overloaded* with too much sensory stimulus…'" (p. 340). The process of radio communication involves more than just the signal. The receiver of the signal, the actual radio, is a specific model with specific parts that vary in durability and performance from brand to brand. The signal, in this case consciousness, is useless without a properly functioning radio, in this case a functional brain. Consciousness may very well continue in some manner beyond the body, but there is no indication it would be anything like the version you are experiencing right now through your nervous system. In other words, even if consciousness exists outside the brain, perceptions can only be meaningfully and coherently perceived through the senses; otherwise, what use is there for perceptual interface technology such as eyes, ears, noses, and tongues? In this scenario, disembodied consciousness would be nothing more than static, countering the notion that "you" (your experience of reality and self-aware identity) would somehow still exist. This is the standard argument against the radio analogy of disembodied consciousness, which is conspicuously absent from the novel's discourse.

In the passage quoted above, rather than relying on the lecture hall setting to confer intellectual credibility, the text uses Langdon himself, whom we have come to regard as the story's embodiment of skeptical yet open-minded inquiry, to reinforce Katherine's argument for the nonlocal interpretation of consciousness, validating her points through authorially contrived affirmations such as "That makes perfect sense…" (p. 340) and "Makes perfect sense so far…" (p. 342). The fact that Langdon, whose intellectual authority has been established throughout five prior novels, finds the argument increasingly plausible facilitates our being able to find it plausible as well. Underlying Brown's novel is the notion that knowledge emerges through persuasion, dialogue, and shared practices within communities, as opposed to the unveiling of eternal, immutable truths. Ideas occur in specific social contexts and are thus bound up with specific social evaluations, as is language itself. Language is in a ceaseless flow of becoming. As philosopher and literary critic M. M. Bakhtin writes, "Language acquires life and historically evolves in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language, nor in the individual psyche of speakers.[11]"

Philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva, who coined the term "intertextuality" in 1966, spoke of intertextuality in terms of a text's horizontal axis (which represents the relationship of speaker to audience) and its vertical axis (which represents the relationship of text to context), highlighting an important fact: each text is an intersection of texts where at least one other text can be read. The utilization of one text by another transforms both texts, giving them additional interpretive dimensions. The encroachment of science into the realms of spirituality creates

hybrid interpretations of mystical phenomena, arising in new language systems with specialized vocabularies that enable and encourage alternate ways to read age-old experiences, such as we find in the musings of Langdon on page 597: "*Perhaps an exorcist is not trying to coax a demon out of a body . . . but rather trying to retune the body's receiver to block the unwanted station.*" In post-structural semiotics, the word *exorcist* does not have a direct link to the objective world; it's a sign, and signs do not possess inherent meanings. Signs possess meaning only in relation to other signs, with the play of signifiers never arriving at a stable signified. Through the dialogue Langdon is having with himself, the word *exorcist* is being repurposed. But notice how the ancient notion of an exorcist and the updated version Langdon is currently entertaining both require a degree of faith. The older usage of the word invites one to wonder how the spirits came to be, and the updated usage invites one to wonder how the signals came to be.

The radio signal analogy of consciousness was popularized by Upton Sinclair with his book *Mental Radio* (Sinclair, 1930). The book describes Sinclair's endeavor to demonstrate and provide scientific evidence that his second wife Mary had telepathic abilities. Sinclair had Mary attempt to duplicate 290 pictures which were drawn by her brother, who served as the "sender" in these telepathy experiments. Mary, the "receiver," relying on psychic impressions rather than sight, would sit in a different room than her brother and try to copy the images he drew. The experiment treats thoughts as if they are signals that can be transmitted from one person to another via a shared mental field or frequency. Sinclair claims Mary successfully duplicated 65 of her brother's drawings, with 155 "partial successes" and 70 failures. Critics dismissed Sinclair's findings because his experiment was not conducted in a controlled scientific environment. Mary's telepathic ability was later tested by psychologist William McDougall in a controlled setting, and the results were unimpressive[12]. Sinclair's understanding of psychic communication relies on consciousness being collective, networked, and nonlocal, conceptually paralleling later post-structuralist views of authorship. Literary theorist Roland Barthes, in his influential essay "The Death of the Author," rejects the notion of authorial ownership of a work's genesis and interpretation, declaring, "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning, or the message of the Author-God, but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture… the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them." Elsewhere he describes text as "woven entirely of citations, references, echoes, cultural languages antecedent and contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony.[13]"

It's worth noting that Albert Einstein wrote the preface to *Mental Radio*, included here in its entirety: "I have read the book of Upton Sinclair with great interest and am convinced that the same deserves the most earnest consideration, not only of the laity, but also of the psychologists by profession. The results of the telepathic experiments carefully and plainly set forth in this book stand surely far beyond those which a nature investigator holds to be thinkable. On the other hand, it is out of the question in the case of so conscientious an observer and writer as Upton Sinclair that he is carrying on a conscious deception of the reading world; his good faith and dependability are not to be doubted. So if somehow the facts here set forth rest not upon telepathy, but upon some unconscious hypnotic influence from person to

person, this also would be of high psychological interest. In no case should the psychologically interested circles pass over this book heedlessly.[14]" Although Einstein does not endorse Sinclair's conclusions, he argues for a willingness to entertain possibilities that are currently beyond our ability to measure and test, prioritizing open-mindedness over rigid adherence to existing scientific doctrine. Broadening the imaginative horizon in turn leads to a broadening of what is considered scientifically and technologically plausible, which in turn brings about further broadening of the imaginative horizon, creating a continuous cycle of possibility. Sinclair would not have had the imaginative resources underpinning his concept of consciousness without the work of Guglielmo Marconi, who is generally credited with the invention of the radio, transmitting the first transatlantic radio signal in 1901 through a wireless telegraph system. Sinclair published his book in 1930. Radio became popular in the 1920s, expanding public imagination to integrate the objective reality of nonlocal communication via disembodied voices. Marconi's invention emerged from over three millennia of accumulated inquiry, expanding upon the work of Nikola Tesla, who advanced the work of Heinrich Hertz, who demonstrably proved the work of James Clerk Maxwell, who systematized the work of Michael Faraday, who questioned the work of Sir Isaac Newton, and so on back to the earliest Greek, Indian, and Mesopotamian mathematical innovators, with each new discovery reshaping the imaginative landscape of their successors, thereby reshaping the physical landscapes of the world.

The first person on record in Western literature to speak of nonlocal consciousness is the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras (c. 500-428 BCE), who describes a universal principle of order he calls *Nous*, which translates to *Mind* or *Reason*. The earliest mention of nonlocal consciousness in Eastern literature is found in the *Upanishads* (c. 800-300 BCE), a collection of philosophical texts which suggest the essential oneness of Brahman (the ultimate, unchanging reality and universal spirit) and Atman (the individual soul, considered a spark of Brahman). The term "nonlocal mind" (and by extension "nonlocal consciousness") was coined by physician and author Larry Dossey in 1989, appearing in his book *Recovering the Soul* (Random House, 1989). According to the back cover of the book: "Dr. Dossey synthesizes the ideas of eminent scientists such as Schrödinger, Einstein, Gödel, and Margenau, with the time-honored knowledge of visionaries and mystics to present convincing evidence for a nonlocal, holistic view of mind and reality that can explain transcendental experiences. In short, he provides new proof of the existence of the soul.[15]" Despite the skeptical reception of his work by the general scientific community, his ideas are considered foundational by those who seek to further the boundaries of conventional science, i.e., researchers of transpersonal psychology and the noetic sciences.

A brief discussion of the CIA's involvement in psychic research culminates in *The Secret of Secrets*' most blatant appeal to authority: "The father of American psychology, William James, had famously said: *In order to disprove the assertion that all crows are black, one white crow is sufficient*. As Katherine described in her manuscript, an entire *flock* of white crows had now been flushed out . . . by noetic science, by quantum physics, and by the work of an impressive cadre of academics who were vocal advocates of nonlocal consciousness. Respected minds like Harold Puthoff, Russel Targ, Edwin May, Dean Radin, Brenda Dunne, Robert Morris, Julia Mossbridge, Robert Jahn, and many others all had made astounding findings in diverse fields like plasma physics, nonlinear mathematics, and consciousness anthropology, all of which supported the notion of nonlocal consciousness" (pp. 408-409). It should be noted that many

scientists have publicly criticized the findings of Harold Puthoff[16], Russel Targ[16], Edwin May[17], Dean Radin[18], and all the others on Katherine's list, citing a lack of scientific rigor, methodological flaws, and mishandled statistics, characterizing their research as pseudoscience. At the same time, it should also be noted that many innovators throughout history initially met resistance from their peers.

A key part of Katherine Solomon's nonlocal consciousness research is revealed on page 346: "'First, I located a terminally ill patient not too far from the lab—a retired neurologist himself—who agreed to undergo his death process while enclosed inside a new kind of imaging machine—a real-time magnetic resonance spectroscopy device. I explained that I would be able to watch his brain chemistry moment by moment as he died. He felt gratified by the chance to provide accurate data like we've never been able to measure previously.'" Except we have been able to measure such an experience. This passage stems from research conducted separately by two neuroscientists, Dr. Jimo Borjigin and Dr. Ajmal Zemmar. A study led by Dr. Jimo Borjigin in 2013 found that parts of the brain designated as the "hot zone" for consciousness become extremely active with high-frequency electrical signals called gamma waves moments after taking dying patients off their ventilator. In one patient the signals remained detectable for more than six minutes. "As she died, [the patient's] brain was functioning in a kind of hyperdrive," reported Borjigin. "For about two minutes after her oxygen was cut off, there was an intense synchronization of her brain waves, a state associated with many cognitive functions, including heightened attention and memory. The synchronization dampened for about eighteen seconds, then intensified again for more than four minutes. It faded for a minute, then came back for a third time[19]." According to Borjigin, "Different parts of [the dying patient's] brain were suddenly in close communication with each other. The most intense connections started immediately after her oxygen stopped, and lasted for nearly four minutes. There was another burst of connectivity more than five minutes and twenty seconds after she was taken off life support. In particular, areas of her brain associated with processing conscious experience—areas that are active when we move through the waking world, and when we have vivid dreams—were communicating with those involved in memory formation. So were parts of the brain associated with empathy. Even as she slipped irrevocably deeper into death, something that looked astonishingly like life was taking place over several minutes in [the dying patient's] brain[20]." In 2022, Dr. Ajmal Zemmar inadvertently recorded the brain activity of a patient who died during a brain scan. In Dr. Zemmar's own words, "We measured 900 seconds of brain activity around the time of death and set a specific focus to investigate what happened in the thirty seconds before and after the heart stopped beating. Just before and after the heart stopped working, we saw [an increase] in a specific band of neural oscillations, so-called gamma oscillations, but also in others such as delta, theta, alpha and beta oscillations[21]." Neural oscillations, also called brain waves, are associated with cognition, specifically such functions as thinking, remembering, and dreaming.

Consistent with the novel's tendency of connecting local narrative details to its broader, nonlocal thematic argument, the reason for Katherine's obsession with proving the nonlocality of consciousness is revealed as she and Langdon are waiting for a computer terminal to power up in order to access data from an advanced virtual reality device: "The experience had changed her life, cementing her passion for consciousness as a field of study. The experiment began with her Princeton professor asking Katherine to stand all alone in an empty room. Over the

intercom, he instructed her to don her VR goggles. When she did, she was instantly transported to a vast meadow where she stood among flowers and trees […] Standing only two feet away from her was an exact double of … *herself* […] Next, the professor's voice on the intercom instructed Katherine to reach up and place a hand on the shoulder of her ghost double […] Fully expecting to touch nothing but air, she was shocked when her hand came to rest on an *actual* physical shoulder. More shocking still, in that exact instant, Katherine felt the weight of her hand on her *own* shoulder!" (pp. 468-469). A study conducted by Olaf Blanke and colleagues in 2007 demonstrated that conflicting visual and tactile stimuli can disrupt the sense of spatial unity between the self and the body. Using virtual reality headsets to view their own body from behind, participants would begin to experience the virtual body they saw in front of them as if it were their own[22].

Despite the neuroscientific factuality of OBEs, we are told Katherine's OBE experiment involved trickery: "After she had donned her VR goggles and stood in position, a lab tech had slipped silently into the room and stood directly in front of Katherine. When she reached up to place her hand on her 'ghost self,' Katherine unwittingly placed her hand on the shoulder of the lab tech, who simultaneously placed *her* hand on Katherine's shoulder" (p. 470). Although Katherine becomes aware of the experiment's duplicity, the jarring experience is enough to liberate her imagination from former ways of categorizing and delimiting consciousness. Perhaps Dan Brown is aiming for a similar experience through reading this novel, attempting to destabilize the skeptical materialist's signifier-signified relationship between biological death (signifier) and the cessation of identity (signified), at the same time undermining, possibly even usurping, dominant religious ideologies that tend to suppress unorthodox imagination. The passage on page 645 provides a clear motive for such an agenda:

"And it's your theory that this troubling pattern stems from humans' fear of death?"

"It's not *my* theory," Katherine said. "It's scientifically proven in mountains of statistical evidence gathered through observational analysis, behavioral experiments, and scientific polling. The most important point in the research, however, shows that those who do *not* fear death, for whatever reason, tend to exhibit behavior that is more benevolent, accepting of others, cooperative, and caring about the environment…"

The Secret of Secrets is a strategically hybridized text, blending formal mechanics of suspense with rhetorical modes of scientific and philosophical discourse, positioning the reader's suspension of disbelief in a liminal space where empirical authority and imaginative speculation mutually reinforce each other. Several mysteries common to the genre overtly drive the plot: the murders of Dr. Brigita Gessner and Michael Harris, the nature of the golem-like entity, Sasha Vesna's role, and the motives of the shadowy agents attempting to prevent Katherine Solomon from publishing her book. Interwoven throughout these puzzles, the novel also explores deeper, more covert mysteries the reader must negotiate beyond the final page: what happens when we die, what is consciousness, what are the social repercussions of science and technology colonizing religious domains, how are neuroscience and quantum physics transforming spiritual discourse, and what constitutes proof in the 21st century?

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